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page 1 to 5

**Federal President Joachim Gauck
to mark the outbreak of the Second World War
(Westerplatte)
1 September 2014
Gdansk/Poland**

Seventy-five years ago today, the Second World War began here on Westerplatte. More than 110 million people took up arms, and almost 60 million lost their lives. More than 60 states were involved in this war, in a conflict lasting six long years which, in the genocide of the Jews, saw an unprecedented level of brutality and contempt for humanity.

People in Poland endured terrible suffering during this war, which was forced on them by the Third Reich. For after the military defeat in October 1939, the violence continued in the form of terror against the civilian population. Hitler wanted more than to redraw the borders laid down by the Treaty of Versailles: he was looking for "Lebensraum" for the German nation. Hitler also wanted more than a Polish vassal state. His aim was to annihilate the Polish state, to eradicate its ruling class and to exploit the remaining population.

Hitler used Poland as a laboratory for his racial fanaticism, as a testing ground for his policy of persecution and extermination against Slavs and Jews. Almost six million Polish citizens died, either arbitrarily shot or systematically liquidated. They perished in prison cells, as forced labourers, under a hail of bombs or in concentration camps.

But there is something else which sets your country apart: no other nation put up resistance on such a scale, nor resisted for so long. The Poles wanted to liberate their country themselves. The Poles wanted a free – a self-determined and independent – country.

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When liberation finally came, however, it brought the nation neither freedom nor independence. Poland was among the victors, yet your country was granted neither freedom nor independence. With the imposition of Soviet rule, one dictatorship was succeeded by another. Poland was liberated thanks to the efforts of Solidarność, many decades later.

The bitter experiences of the Polish nation in particular show that only nations which are free to choose their own path really can live in peace with their neighbours. Only nations which respect the independence and self-determination of others really can live in peace with their neighbours.

Today there are most likely only a few individuals left in Germany who bear personal responsibility for the crimes of the National Socialist state. I myself was just five years old when the war ended. However, as the offspring of a generation which either committed or tolerated brutal crimes, and as the offspring of a state which robbed people of their humanity, I feel deep shame and deep sympathy for those who suffered at the hands of the Germans. For me, for us, for all post-war generations in Germany, yesterday's guilt gives rise to a special responsibility for today and tomorrow.

If the relations between nations are marked so profoundly by injustice and pain, by arrogance and humiliation as they were between Germans and Poles, it is by no means inevitable that enmity will be transformed into reconciliation. I therefore regard the close ties which have developed between our two nations as a miracle.

In order to make this miracle a reality, people with political astuteness and a strong will were – and indeed still are – needed. We need people with political astuteness to carry on along the path which Western Europe embarked upon in 1950 with the creation of a European family of nations and continued after 1989 together with Central and Eastern Europe. And we need people with a strong will to keep alive the memory of the painful past but, ultimately, to leave it behind – for the sake of a shared future.

I am aware of the long shadows, the suffering and injustice, which darken people's souls. I am aware that suffering has to be mourned and that injustice calls for atonement. We must therefore continue to deal honestly with the past, we should not ignore or gloss over anything and we should give recognition to the victims. However, I am also aware that wounds cannot heal if rancour and resentment prevent reconciliation with the new reality and deny people a future.

And it is precisely for the sake of these people that we must ensure that neither old nor new nationalism is allowed to flourish. For the sake of this future, let us continue to build a peaceful and democratic Europe together and remember with gratitude those

Germans and Poles who reached out to each other early on: courageous people in the Catholic and Protestant churches, in Action Reconciliation - Service for Peace and intellectuals in both countries. We Germans in particular will never forget Willy Brandt going down on his knees in Warsaw, that gesture of humility with which he asked for forgiveness for the crimes committed by Germans during the Second World War. We also remember Chancellor Helmut Kohl and Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki embracing in Krzyzowa – only three days after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989. This embrace symbolised in a moving way the end of enmity, distrust and war as well as the desire for understanding and reconciliation.

When twenty European Heads of State and Government gathered here on Westerplatte exactly five years ago to remember the atrocities of the Second World War, we believed we were on the way to creating a free and peaceful continent. We believed – and wanted to believe – that Russia, too, the land of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, could become part of this common Europe. We believed – and wanted to believe – that political and economic reforms would bring our neighbour to the east closer to the European Union and that the adoption of universal values would lead to closer institutional ties between us.

No-one imagined at the time just how thin the political ice on which we were treading was. How mistaken we were to believe that the desire to maintain stability and peace had finally gained precedence over the ambition to gain power. It therefore came as a shock when we were confronted with the realisation that an armed conflict was once more being waged on the fringes of Europe; an armed conflict about new borders and a new order. Yes, stability and peace on our continent really are in jeopardy once more.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the European Union, NATO and the group of leading industrialised nations had each developed special relations with Russia and integrated the country in various ways. This partnership has de facto been terminated by Russia. We for our part hope for continued partnership and good neighbourliness in the future. However, this will only be possible if Russia changes its policy and goes back to respecting the principles of international law.

As we respect the principles of the rule of law, keep strengthening it and will not tolerate it being replaced by the law of the strong, we will take a firm stand against anyone who violates international law, annexes territory belonging to another state or provides military support for secessions in other countries. That is why we stand up for the values to which we owe our peaceful coexistence in freedom. We will adapt our policies, economies and readiness to defend to the new circumstances. The European Union and the United States will not allow themselves to become divided over these fundamental questions, not now and not in the future.

History teaches us that making territorial concessions merely whets the appetite of aggressors. And history also teaches us that an escalation which has spun out of control can give rise to a momentum which at some point becomes unmanageable. That is why Germany – indeed the entire European Union – is set on a foreign and security policy geared to de-escalation which combines firm principles with a willingness to compromise, as well as decisiveness with flexibility; and which is able to put a stop to aggression without blocking political solutions.

Europe is facing major new challenges. What we are currently experiencing is the erosion of old orders and the emergence of new forms of violence on Europe's periphery. That also applies to the Middle East and North Africa. The Arab Spring led to democracy and stability in few countries, and the unrest and power struggles continue in many places. Islamist groups have gained considerable influence; especially violent fundamentalists have assumed control of parts of Syria and Iraq.

In contrast to previous rebellions, these groups are not seeking to take over power along nation-state lines. They are far more radical and their aim is to establish a terrorist caliphate in the Arab region. Fanaticised and brutalised men and women from a range of countries are using religion and morality to persecute and sometimes murder all who resist them – Muslims and people of other faiths. They regard our Western cities and states as hotbeds of depravity. They are fighting against democracy, the societal form which emerged from the Enlightenment, and they reject the universality of human rights.

Preventing and combating this terrorism is in the vital and common interest of the international community and thus Europe. Firstly, due to the geographical proximity: the refugees from the Middle East are coming to us in Europe, while the terrorists are seeking new recruits in our countries. Secondly, because the conflict can come to Europe. The possibility that European states will also become the targets of Islamist attacks cannot be ruled out.

When we celebrate today's anniversary together here on Westerplatte, we are not only confronting ourselves with what people proved capable of in the Second World War. We are also quite consciously confronting ourselves with what people are capable of today.

Yes, we have come together here today to remember. However, we have also come together in the shadow of the current threats facing us. I am certain that Germans and Poles stand side by side and that we have the same objectives.

The European Union must also remain united in the face of the new challenges. Only together can we succeed in building the

democratic and peaceful Europe of the future. And only together can we defend it.